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SUBJECT: Bloodless Holy War: The Beckfords vs Yad L'Achim

REF: Tel Aviv 00189

1. Summary: Consular officers went to the city of Arad in the Negev desert to interview two American citizens about their ongoing conflict with the anti-missionary group, Yad L'Achim (lit., "Hand to Brothers"). While the Americans are clearly being harassed in their pursuit of daily activities, they do not appear to be in danger from Yad L'Achim. What they are in has been called by media, "a bloodless Holy War over Jewish souls in the Jewish homeland." Their antagonist is a relentless, unyielding organization and the prognosis is that eventually, Yad L'Achim may well succeed in getting one of the missionaries deported from Israel. End summary.

Facts

2. Embassy Tel Aviv Consular officers and staff traveled to the Negev desert city of Arad on September 18 to visit Lura and Eddie Beckford, who had reported to us that they were being severely harassed as they tried to go about their business of running a chess club and converting Jews to Christianity. While in Arad (and later in Beersheva), we spoke with the Beckfords, other members of their missionary community, local and regional police officials, and members of Yad L'Achim.

3. The saga started simply enough. Lura Maiman immigrated to Israel in the 1990's with her Jewish husband, who died in 1999. Eddie Beckford was a buddy of Mr. Maiman's from the Vietnam War who eventually came to Israel and married the widowed Lura. The two are self-styled Christian missionaries working to convert local Jews to Christianity. A community of about 20 American-Israelis and 80, mostly Russian, immigrants has coalesced around the Beckfords and a Christian preacher named Yehoyakim Figris. They attend Christian services held in members' homes and many of the men play chess or dominos in the Beckfords' modest club house. Every week at their clubhouse the Beckfords distribute used clothing and other items along with Christian literature to anyone who wants it.

4. But things got complicated. This missionary activity attracted

the attention and determined opposition of the group Yad L'Achim, an organization dedicated to assisting new immigrants to Israel and fighting the conversion of Jews to other religions. Stopping the Beckfords is a top priority of Yad L'Achim, and for years its members of have been harassing the Beckfords and others in their community. Tactics include playing loud music incessantly to disturb the concentration of the chess players; taking photos of club members and others who visit the premises, publishing newspaper articles about the missionary activities, and picketing the clubhouse and community members' homes. The strategy seems to be focused on Eddie Beckford, who is not yet an Israeli citizen and could be subject to deportation for a criminal offense.

15. Yad L'Achim harassment of the Beckfords has resulted in four significant events. First, police prevented Yad L'Achim members from picketing the homes of congregants, resulting in a case now before the Supreme Court alleging that by so doing the police are violating Yad L'Achim member's right to demonstrate. Second, their chess club was burned down on August 4, 2005. Then, a mentally ill man not associated with Yad L'Achim entered the clubhouse and again attempted to burn it down, this time with people inside. And finally, Eddie Beckford violently attacked a Yad L'Achim member and is being processed criminally for the assault and battery.

Yad L'Achim

16. Yad L'Achim was established in 1950 in order to assist new immigrants settle in Israel, integrate into Jewish religious organizations, and to find jobs. Yad L'Achim also provides food, clothing and apartments free of charge to poor Jews "recovered" from missionary groups. The group is funded by donations, including some from the GOI to support their women's shelter activities (last year the organization rescued 58 children and 34 women from "bad" marriages to Arabs). Its primary objective, according to co-founder Rabbi Shalom Lifschitz, is, given the Holocaust, "let not Jews disappear from the earth."

17. Over the years Yad L'Achim has "assumed other responsibilities" such as fighting missionaries and helping families "bring home" daughters who married outside the faith. Lifschitz told us that there are some 60 full-time employees and perhaps as many as 600 volunteers in the organization. Yad L'Achim claims that there are at least 100 congregations and cults in Israel that are actively seeking to convert Jews to various religions, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Messianic Jews, Scientology, Hare Krishna, Falun Gong, and Landmark Forum. [N.B., Public sources estimate that there may be as many as 10,000 Messianic Jews in Israel.]

18. On the other hand, the targets of Yad L'Achim are vociferous in their denunciation of the group. Messianic Jews and members of other "targeted" religious groups accuse the Yad L'Achim of verbally harassing congregation members after services, videotaping them and writing down their license plate numbers, reporting them to the security services, spray painting graffiti on houses and other "Messianic" facilities, slashing their tires, slapping and spitting at them, getting them fired from their jobs or deported, etc. One lawyer we spoke with has a case list of 93 clients from all over Israel who believe they have suffered "discrimination" in various pursuits from gaining residency to keeping teaching jobs. The lawyer believes that Yad L'Achim has had a hand in most of these cases.

Issue of Security

19. The primary concern of the Embassy is that the Beckfords and the other American citizen-members of their community is that the ideological harassment does not turn violent or inspire violence from third parties to the conflict. Deputy Consul General interviewed Rosi Shapira, a respected rabbi who is knowledgeable about Yad L'Achim. Shapira described the organization as a humanitarian group -- but one that is very shrewd and creative in dreaming up "dirty tricks." Shapira explained that Yad L'Achim will go to great lengths to achieve their anti-missionary objectives, but will not violate the law. Shapira knows of no instance in the group's 56-year history where they have used violence to gain their ends.

¶10. Additionally, we have been assured by the regional police authorities that Yad L'Achim is not a violent group and that police intelligence indicates the Americans are not in danger. Moreover, the local police have promised to increase their presence in the Arad marketplace where the Beckfords' clubhouse is located. Most importantly for the Beckfords, the police have counseled them to remain passive in the face of Yad L'Achim provocations. Eddie Beckford, however, said he is not a passive man and probably would not be able to restrain himself if further provoked (an evitable event).

¶11. The threat of violence has, however, spread beyond Yad L'Achim. Supporters in the movement against the Beckfords include many people outside the Haredi community (orthodox Jews who reject modern secular culture). Several months ago, leading citizens, including the former mayor, met in Arad with Yad L'Achim members to denounce the conversion activities of the Beckfords. Although the meeting also denounced any use of violence, three days later a secular Israeli Jew tried to set fire to the chess club.

¶12. At least twice before the Beckford fires, fires were set in unoccupied missionary warehouses in other parts of Israel. Luckily, there were no injuries in any of these attacks and, unfortunately, police made no arrests. Also, in December 2005, a crowd of several hundred Haredim attacked a congregation in nearby Beer Sheva after a Yad L'Achim warning that "ten busloads" of Jews were to be baptized (see reftel). Clearly, Yad L'Achim activity incites violent behavior against Messianic Jews, and other missionary religious groups and their property, despite the official non-violent character of the group and it is disingenuous to deny the link.

The Religious Conflict

¶13. As most people know, Israel is a land of perpetual religious conflict. What many do not know is that the scale of those conflicts ranges from world and regional contests to spats between individuals. Rabbi Shapira put clash into a broader context by noting Judaism considers the conversion of a Jew to another faith as one of the gravest moral acts possible, on a par with murder. In the eyes of Yad L'Achim, the Beckfords and other missionaries have come to Israel to engage in a legal, but morally obscene activity, that demands members be dedicated eradicating it.

¶14. Despite the religious questions involved, proselytizing in Israel (specifically, trying to convert Jews to another religion) is legal. But it is illegal to offer money or other "material inducements" to Jews to convert, or to proselytize anyone under the age of 18. Yad L'Achim argues that the clothing and other charity/assistance given to poor Jews by the missionaries amount to material inducements and that preaching to the children of congregants is on its face illegal. The police and courts however, so far do not agree.

¶15. Abusing the Israeli Law of Return, however, is another matter. A foundation of the modern state of Israel, the law permits any Jew to immigrate to the Israel as a citizen by right, but does not apply to Jews who convert to another religion. Several high-profile missionaries have publicly admitted that they immigrated to Israel under false pretenses. In one case, a prominent American Messianic Jew had withheld this key information and was turned down by the Ministry of the Interior based on information supplied by Yad L'Achim. For their part, many missionaries make no secret about their belief that their ultimate "prize" is the conversion of a Jew to Christianity and that there is no better place to accomplish that than in the Holy Land itself -- where Jews have resisted conversion for 2000 years.

Conclusion

¶16. The Beckfords are locked into a millennial battle in which neither side will back down. The Beckfords will undoubtedly continue to proselytize Jews and Yad L'Achim will continue their harassment. Despite assurances from police, violence from some quarter will remain a possibility. In the end, Eddie Beckford might prove accommodating and again bash a Haredi, providing the grounds

necessary for the Ministry of Interior to revoke his residence permit and deport him. As for USG interests, it appears that the Beckfords are enjoying the protection of Israeli law and that they are not being targeted for their nationality. They are in fact, being allowed to practice their religion and are even being protected in their missionary activities -- albeit, in balance with Yad L'Achim's exercise of their rights to demonstrate against those activities.

JONES